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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides background information on literacy for television and radio broadcasters. It focuses first on the numbers of functionally illiterate persons in the United States and what those numbers mean. Central to understanding those numbers, as pointed out by the booklet, is the definition of illiteracy that is used, a definition that is changing. The guide then suggests local issues that can be defined and examined in a community, such as welfare reform and literacy, work force literacy, and family illiteracy. The guide then points out programming ideas on literacy that television and radio broadcasters can use, along with other general ideas. It also includes sources of additional information, sample public service announcements, and a sample editorial. (KC)

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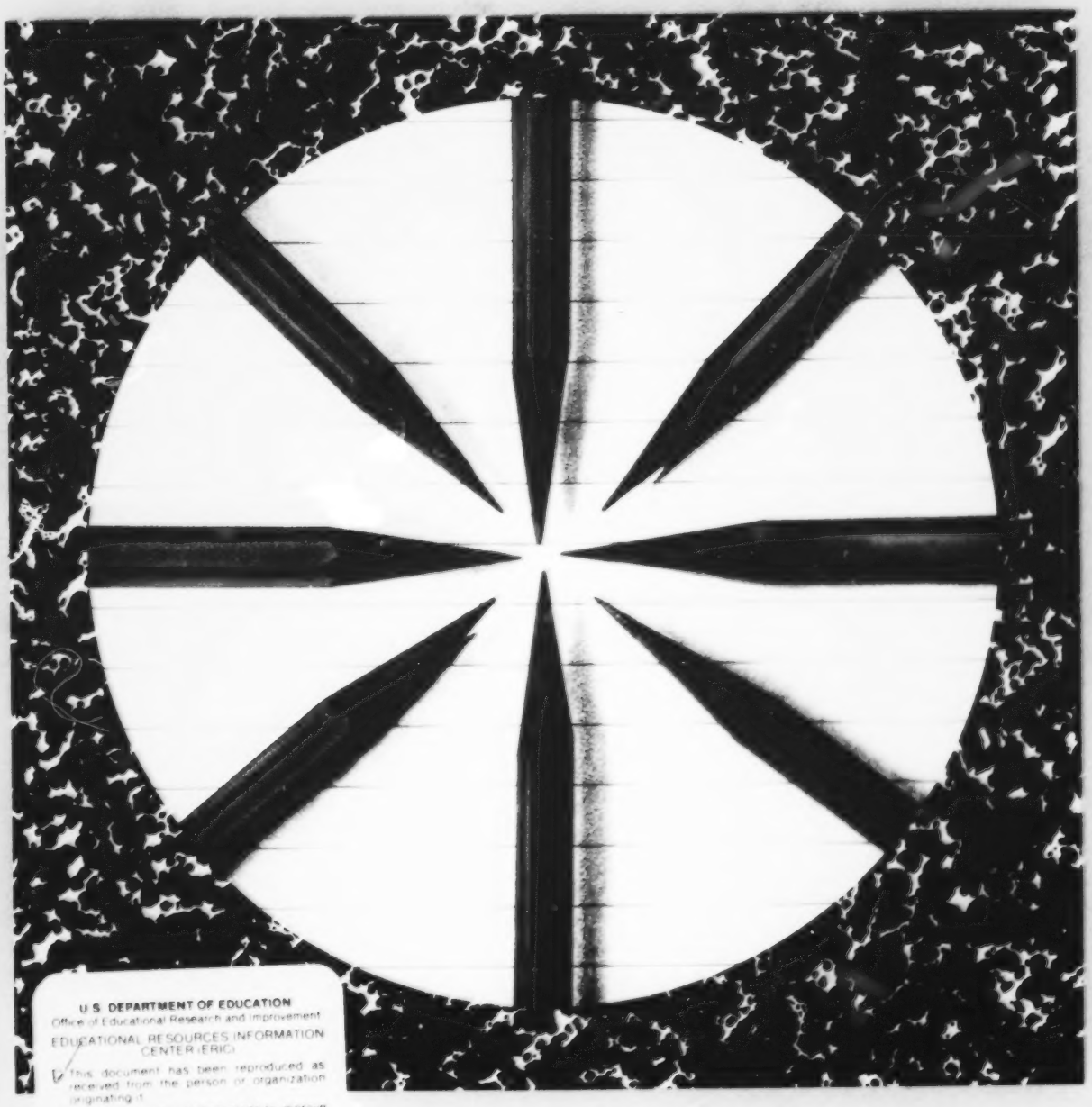
Focus on Literacy

Part 1: The Numbers Game



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Funded in the Interest of
A More Literate and Productive America
By a Grant From

The Diana Corporation

111 East Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Ninety five percent of young Americans have a literacy level that in 1950 was considered sufficient to hold a job. So why are millions now considered only marginally literate, even though they have a higher level of literacy ability? Because these skills are not good enough to perform the more complicated tasks of the modern workplace. As one researcher describes the dilemma, a worker who once used a wrench and applied skills to the job that he learned repairing his car now must operate sophisticated equipment and depend upon abstract symbols (on a computer screen) to tell him what is going on.

National assessments in every subject over the past decade have pointed out the lack of reasoning skills among students. Employer surveys say workers today cannot interpret manuals or handle statistical quality controls. College faculty complain of students whose basic skills are weak and who also cannot apply knowledge to problem solving. Yet, the majority of new jobs to be created in this decade are expected to require education and or training beyond high school.

These are generalities, but they are voiced enough to indicate this country is trying to run high on low literacy.

Can Americans work smarter? Do they want to? We won't know unless we ask tough questions and communicate strong messages about what needs to be done.

This is the first in an ongoing series of reports designed to help you explain this complex issue to your listeners and viewers in terms they can more readily understand.

We hope you will find ***Focus on Literacy*** a useful tool in your station's continuing efforts to address the economic and social concerns of your community.

Major assistance in this report was provided by Anne Lewis and Lisa Walker of the National Education Writers Association, with special assistance from Audrey Cohen, author, teacher, producer of television and radio programming.

FWA is the national professional association of reporters, editors and other journalists who specialize in education and related issues. It operates the Media Resource Project on Literacy with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Photo courtesy of United Way of America

In measuring literacy, we are getting away from merely looking at the number of grades completed in school and beginning to measure what people actually can do with their reading abilities. The results are not encouraging.

The Numbers Game

One reason the public thinks literacy is "someone else's problem" is because the information it gets is bogged down in numbers that no longer mean much.

There are widely different estimates of adult literacy. And because so much attention has been focused on the non-reader, Americans tend to think non-readers are our literacy problem.

But, only about 1% of the people in your community probably are true illiterates—those unable to do even very basic reading and writing tasks. And, only 5% read below the fourth grade level, which up through World War II was considered the dividing line between illiteracy and literacy. Then, why do we have estimates of adult illiteracy ranging from 17 million to more than 60 million? Because the definitions of literacy are changing very fast. And, in measuring literacy, we are getting away from merely looking at the number of grades completed in school (although this still is the major measure) and beginning to measure what people actually can do with their reading abilities. The results are not encouraging.

Experts go about defining literacy in different ways, but no matter how you look at it, our literacy levels are not very high. Only about one half of young adults (ages 20-25) could perform basic literacy tasks asked of them in a survey reported by the National Assessment of

Educational Progress in 1987. Only one fifth had the reading skills needed for college level work. A U.S. Army study in the 1980s found that the average young adult (ages 18-23) was reading only at the level of a student about halfway through the ninth grade (Blacks and Hispanics were about two years behind this average).

What the Numbers Mean

Who has a literacy problem in your community? What would be the target audiences for certain messages? These are the populations you should be looking at, although their problems will vary from one place to another:

- Those who cannot read or who barely understand written information. This includes only a small group — 1% of young adults 21-25 according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, although it is a more serious problem for older persons.

- Those who have low basic skills, poor educational background and/or work experience. The number is hard to define but includes the unemployed, sporadically employed or those employed in low-skill service or agricultural positions prior to recent changes in the economy. This group may be concentrated in rural or urban areas with low educational and high poverty levels. They are more likely to be high school dropouts and women. (Other definitions: between fourth and eighth grade reading level.)

- Workers whose skills may have been adequate in the past but whose mathematical, writing and reasoning skills need upgrading for the changing economy. This group exists throughout the economy as jobs change and technical skill levels increase. These people are functionally literate, probably employed, and may total 20 to 30 million. (Other definitions: between eighth and 11th grade reading level.)

- Those whose dominant language is other than English and are likely to be recent immigrants. Nearly all literacy programs report a huge influx of persons who speak other languages and want to improve their English language skills, often because of immigration law requirements. Studies confirm that these new immigrants are learning English as rapidly as previous immigrant groups, particularly the young.

- The non-reader, encompassing two groups at the extremes of the literacy continuum—the learning disabled and the aliterate.

- Adults with learning disabilities that went undetected while they were in school constitute a large percentage of those with literacy problems, especially among the incarcerated. At the other end, concern is growing about the number of adults who can read but don't—the aliterate. According to the Library of Congress, 44% of adult Americans who can read will not read even one book this year.

Ten Indicators of a Literacy Problem In Your Community

- The school dropout rate (look for signs in the middle/junior high school grades, not just high school figures. Nationally, one of four 18-19-year-olds has not completed high school, but dropout rates are higher for Blacks, although improving, and even higher for Hispanics).
- The number of people on welfare and the length of time they have been clients (agencies must give priority to those who have been on welfare three of the last five years).
- The unemployment rate (by age groups such as youth, young adults, those ages 30-45, and older job-seekers).
- The number of dislocated workers — those who have lost their jobs because of plant closings or changes in job requirements (an entering worker today can expect an average of five job changes that require higher/different skills).
- Number of applicants turned down by businesses because of a lack of skills compared to five years ago.
- Enrollment/waiting lists for adult education programs (major demand has been from non-English speaking adults; Black males are under represented in national figures).
- Number and nature of new training programs instituted by local businesses compared to five years ago (about 70% of the workforce in the year 2000 already is in the pool; nationally, business/industry spend less than 1% of their education/training funds on basic skills improvement—most of investment goes for those at managerial/executive level).
- Education level of incarcerated persons.
- Number of accidents/health/safety problems in workplace and homes attributed to literacy problems compared to five years ago.
- Number of children whose parents did not finish high school (future literacy problem).

Definition on the Way

Congress has mandated that the U.S. Office of Education determine the criteria for defining literacy and estimate the number of illiterate adults in the country. The Educational Testing Service has the contract for this study and expects to have a definition ready later this year. It then will conduct household interviews and report its findings in 1993.

Photo courtesy of United Way of America

Except for learning disabilities, workplace changes and new immigrant populations, most illiteracy in this country is tied to the mother's educational level and is passed from one generation to the next.

Defining Local Issues

With changes in welfare policies, new Federal funding for adult literacy and higher skills needed in jobs, there are a lot of interesting stories in your community for your viewers and listeners.

Welfare Reform and Literacy

Almost one-half of the states already have started their programs under the new Federal welfare legislation, the Family Support Act. All will be under it by October 1, 1990. This is the program to watch in local communities. It will require education and social service agencies to work together. It forces schools or community training agencies to deal with the literacy needs of people who largely have been ignored or overlooked in the past. The majority of welfare recipients are single, poorly educated women with children.

The issues in your community:

- One jumps out right away — the regulations for the new act say that a welfare recipient who demonstrates eighth grade skills does not need to have further education programs. Is that standard good enough for the jobs in your area? Will jobs requiring only an eighth grade literacy skill level get a person out of poverty in your job market?
- States which experimented with some of the reforms before they were enacted at the Federal level learned that estimates of how much additional education is needed to get off welfare were far short. Who is going to manage the education programs in your community and how much funding will be available per person?

- Welfare recipients under age 20 for whom a regular school program would not be appropriate must be given alternatives. What out-of-school education programs are available in your community?

- The largest percentage of the welfare funds must go for services to those who have been on welfare the longest. What do statistics show about their education level?

Workforce Literacy

No issue has gripped policymakers and business leaders in recent months as much as workforce literacy.

Jobs requiring more education are projected to grow faster; those which a high school dropout could do will grow by just under 14% by the year 2000; those requiring some college or four or more years of college will grow more than 25%. Many low-skill jobs have been automated.

Occupations are changing for some very specific reasons — consumers want a greater variety of goods and services; employers want more teamwork and decentralized authority; and more innovation and crisis management is expected of workers.

Some sources of recent information about new skills:

- The National Center on Education and the Economy in Rochester, NY, released a study in June that compares skill levels and training opportunities in the United States with those of other industrialized countries.

- Secretary of Labor Elizabeth Dole has appointed a commission to develop guidelines on the skills young people need to enter the workforce, a joint effort of business and education leaders. She also is seeking support for "portable credentials" in American business industry, which would allow workers trained in a structured apprenticeship system to be certified for work anywhere in the country.

The issues in your community:

- Which job sectors are growing, or contracting, and by how much?

- What are the reasons for unemployment—lack of jobs, lack of skills, lack of retraining opportunities?

- What literacy skills do employers in your area say they need and how have these changed?

From One Generation to the Next — Family Illiteracy

Except for learning disabilities, workplace changes and new immigrant populations, most illiteracy in this country is tied to the mother's educational level and is passed from one generation to the next.

When Appalachian youngsters could be absorbed into the local economy or inner-city youth could ease into a manufacturing job without high skills, this may not have been such a big problem. Today, it is — because families are getting poorer and less able to pass on literacy skills. Literacy programs now try to involve the whole family, not just the children.

In 1982-83, 39% of the children living in poverty had parents who had not completed high school; only 7% came from families where both parents were high school graduates. Further, teenagers living in poverty are four times more likely to have poor academic skills than those whose families are above the poverty line. As poverty increases (the number of young families headed by a person younger than 25 who live in poverty has doubled in the last 15 years), illiteracy also increases. Another problem—fewer than 50% of girls who become teenage mothers complete high school.

The issues in your community:

- What is the educational level of adults receiving welfare, especially those who have been on welfare for a long time?

- Family literacy programs are growing. Some states are way ahead of others on this—Missouri, Connecticut, Maryland, Minnesota, and Kentucky in particular. Lowell, MA and San Antonio, TX have good programs aimed at Hispanic families. Has your community developed similar programs?

- Most successful family literacy programs deal with a number of issues at once. These include parenting skills, literacy taught through preparation for jobs, and making connections to community services. Are literacy services for families in your area comprehensive?

Where Is The Money Coming From?

Adult literacy, until very recently, has been a step-child among Federal programs. However, its fiscal 1990 appropriation reached a new high of $172 million, and Congress is working on bills that will provide even more funding, as well as support for research and for training. The important item about this new effort—the money will flow to the states. State leadership will be responsible for developing policies and programs.

Photo courtesy of KOMO Television

The most obvious month for public affairs programming on literacy is September, which includes National Literacy Day. However, literacy can be an important component in other public affairs and special events / holiday programming.

Programming Ideas

Warm stories about Uncle Joe who learns to read after he retires may get listener or viewer attention—but usually not for long. Yet, literacy can be a provocative, controversial and stick-with-it issue that gets people thinking and communities talking—and some action.

Viewers and listeners need to know that for every Joe who finds a program to help him, there are hundreds who don't. Why is that so? Stories also should be looking ahead. If Joe is still in the workforce and manages to meet the literacy standards for his job in 1990, will those skills still be adequate in 1995? Which employers will invest in educating and training the Joes of your community? There are no definitive answers to these questions, but any story that doesn't explore national implications and leave at least one questioning thought with the viewers and listeners is not getting the most out of the issue.

Controversies are right under the surface. Educators, for example, do not agree about what works in literacy instruction and about who is qualified to teach adults. If employers say they need workers with new and better skills, how can the traditional adult education programs deliver?

Community-based educators will say that emphasizing workplace literacy is too narrow; this direction will not really help people take charge of their lives. To let an audience understand these controversies, get literacy champions from different philosophies together at a table and let them argue it out.

Ideas For Television

- Feature a "new reader" or "reading family" of the week month. Profile mothers now off welfare because of education training, workers initially reluctant to admit a literacy problem who are now benefiting from classes, or formerly unskilled workers now in supervisory positions.

- Reach special target groups (i.e. school dropouts, children, etc.) by scheduling literacy PSAs during specific dayparts.

- Enlist the help of local literacy organizations to identify new readers or non-readers for news and public affairs interviews.

- Give new readers more chances to comment on camera. Many experiences of new readers and of teachers and volunteers have yet to be portrayed. For example, literacy promotions for volunteer programs often imply that anyone can teach someone else to read, but the reality is that it takes more than goodwill. While many volunteers are able to make a superb contribution, many others become discouraged when the teaching materials don't seem to do the job, when learning disabilities become evident and there is no one to whom the student can be referred.

- Similarly, many workers seek literacy classes because they need better skills to hold on to their jobs or get promoted. Traditional basic skills programs may not fit their needs. However, there are some excellent programs often developed by business and labor working together that tailor literacy instruction to the specifics of jobs. Find students from successful local programs.

- Work with local groups to develop instructional programming to specific audiences. Such programs are more effective when they address adults in special contexts. These may include specific occupations, regional background, or linguistic/ethnic backgrounds of the targeted audiences.

Ideas For Radio

- Put new readers on call-in programs. This is a highly effective method of raising awareness, tailor-made for radio. For added impact, arrange to have individuals who have had a literacy problem taking the calls. Experts and educators, however empathetic, don't hold a candle to peers in this arena.

- Emphasize the many facets of the literacy problem. This could be done as a kind of "blitz" during literacy month, or, more subtly throughout the year. Use reports on key issues in literacy, visits to local program sites, panel discussions featuring educators and politicians who have conflicting viewpoints on issues, call-in programs featuring adult students, 'read-a-thons' with local celebrities reading from favorite books, and newly-developed formats.

- Link literacy with fun. Vital as literacy is to the nation's survival, it is also a route to pleasure and escape. Build on-air promotions and contests that spotlight local literacy programs. These are important needs, too.

- Fight aliteracy. Too many Americans who can read don't. Encourage your listeners to re-discover reading. Some stations have been bringing short stories and radio theatre adaptations back to the airwaves. But if your station has no long-form or talk-show programs, have on-air personalities mention an interesting book they have read or reviewed.

- Finally, remember that one of the strengths of radio is its diversity. Whether your format is contemporary, country, urban, MOR, news/talk or easy listening, you know how best to reach your listeners. The important thing is to get involved — and get your staff involved.

Other General Ideas

- Tie in coverage of the literacy issue with other programming. It is not just an education story, as the ideas above illustrate. The most obvious month for public affairs programming on literacy is September, which includes National Literacy Day. However, literacy can be an important component in other public affairs and special events/holiday programming.
- Labor Day weekend is a good time for programs dealing with workplace literacy. Mother's Father's Grandparents' Day could highlight intergenerational literacy—reading to children, helping them with homework, etc. This also would be a good time to look at the situation of single welfare mothers who need literacy training and how the new welfare reform programs are affecting them.
- On November 14, students in elementary classrooms across the country will observe National Young Reader's Day. Pizza Hut is one of the project's co-sponsors and the opportunity exists for stations to develop promotional tie-ins with their local Pizza Hut franchise.
- Secretary's Day/Week could highlight the issue of new literacy skills needed in the office, such as computer and mathematical literacy. At Christmas time, try a human interest feature about adult new readers able to read the cards they get and to write personal messages—and relate their reading to other measures of their successes and struggles.
- On July 4, look at what's happening to new immigrants trying to learn another language.
- Any health-related events or observances could bring up the issue of literacy and public health: can patients understand the brochures circulated to warn them about health hazards, e.g., high-risk AIDS behavior? Or medical directions for children? Or warning messages on poisons—both at home and in the workplace?
- Involve adult literacy students in the planning of public affairs programs and news features. Until now, literacy students have been interviewed mainly to illustrate "the problem" or give testimonials on certain "solutions." The same would be true of workers involved in programs to improve their literacy because of new job demands, or dependent mothers who are able to move off welfare because of new educational opportunities. It is time to invite students to give their side and to help shape programming in order to arrive at more accurate and complex portrayals of people and their problems.
- Make your station's commitment to improving literacy more visible by editorializing and airing PSAs at prime listening and viewing times.
- Finally, become involved in your local literacy task force. If there isn't one in your area, take the lead and help organize one.

Sources of Additional Information

National Association of Broadcasters, Don LeBrecht, 1771 N Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-2891, (202) 429-5330

Education Writers Association, Lisa Walker or Anne Lewis, 1001 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 429-9680

American Association for Adult and Continuing Education Judy Koloski, 1112 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036 (202) 463-6333

Association for Community-Based Education, Chris Zachariadis, 1805 Florida Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20009, (202) 462-6333

Business Council for Effective Literacy, Gail Spangenberg 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020, (212) 512-2415

Center for Applied Linguistics (has a National Clearinghouse for Literacy Education for Limited-English-Speaking Adults), JoAnn Crandall, 1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037, (202) 429-9292

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, (a data-base maintained by the federal govt.), Ohio State University, 1900 Kenny Street, Columbus, OH 43210, (614) 292-4353

Clearinghouse on Adult Education and Literacy, Tammy Olinger, Mary Switzer Bldg., Rm. 4428, 400 Maryland Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20202-7240, (202) 732-2396

Division of Adult Education, Joan Seamon, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20202

Kenan Family Trust Family Literacy Project, Sharon Darling, One Riverfront Plaza, Suite 608, Louisville, KY 40202, (502) 584-1133

International Reading Association, Ronald Mitchell, 800 Barksdale Road, Newark, DE 19714, (302) 731-1600

Laubach Literacy International, Peter Waite, 1320 Jamestown Avenue, Syracuse, NY 13210, (315) 422-9121

Literacy Volunteers of America, Jinx Crouch, 408 Oak Street, Syracuse, NY 13202-2994, (315) 445-8000

Push Literacy Action Now,(PLAN), Michael Fox, 1332 G Street, SE, Washington, DC 20009, (202) 547-8903

United Way of America, Annette Laico, National Literacy Initiative, 701 North Fairfax Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, (703) 836-7100

Focus on Literacy *is a project of the Broadcast Industry Council to Improve American Productivity, Jerry Lee, Chairman.*

Public Service Announcements

:20 — A lot of people in (COMMUNITY) are spending time at night and on weekends making a better future for themselves. They're learning to read for the first time or improving their reading skills so they can take advantage of the way our economy's changing. Get ready for tomorrow's opportunities. Call (AGENCY) at (NUMBER) to find out about the many local literacy programs that are available to help you.

:20 — A competitive America thinks on its feet. Almost everyone in the workforce needs better skills or new ones to make better products, provide better services, make better decisions. If you know someone who has a reading problem, do them a favor: call (AGENCY) at (NUMBER) for information on the wide variety of programs available here in (COMMUNITY). We need to learn together so we can build together.

:30 — Illiteracy is a very personal problem. The mother who can't read the instructions on medicine prescribed for her child. The older person who can't read the past-due notice he has just received. The worker struggling to understand the manual for a new piece of equipment he's been assigned to operate. If you know someone who has a reading problem, do them a favor: call (AGENCY) at (NUMBER) for information on the wide variety of programs available here in (COMMUNITY). Once again, that number is (NUMBER). Remember, help is only a phone call away and all calls are confidential.

:30 — Are you one of the many in (COMMUNITY) who has a reading problem? A teenage mother who never finished high school? A recent immigrant for whom English is a second language? A worker who needs to keep up with advancing technology? There are many local literacy programs that can help, but how do you find them? (AGENCY) has a special literacy hot-line. Call (NUMBER) to find out what programs are available and how they can help you . . . or a friend. Once again, that number is (NUMBER). Remember, help is only a phone call away and all calls are confidential.

Sample Editorial

This would be a better community if everyone could read. So goes the conventional wisdom. Simply encourage people who want to read and the battle is nearly won.

Well, that just isn't so. For one thing, it's a lot tougher to find help than you might think. Consider this true story from another part of the country.

A medium-sized wholesale company found it was losing money because all too often the wrong goods were being sent out to customers. The problem: some of its warehouse workers couldn't read the invoices. Instead of firing the problem workers, though, the company decided to help them.

And that's when the company managers discovered how hard it can be to get into a literacy program. The yellow pages were consulted, community agencies canvassed, even the school board was contacted. Over 50 phone calls were made before a suitable program was found.

This story has a happy ending. The company found a program that worked for their employees.

However, this company's experience underscores the need to provide ready access to reading and job training programs. Imagine the problems an individual would have knowing where to turn for help.

Here in (CITY) we're fortunate. We have (NAME OF PROGRAM OR AGENCY). If you know someone who is looking to upgrade his skills, (CALL LETTERS) urges them to call (NUMBER) for more information. There's no cost and all inquiries will be kept confidential.

Alternate Ending

(CALL LETTERS) urges that a central source of information or single telephone number be established where such information is readily accessible without charge. The cost would be minimal and the benefits enormous. A skilled, well-trained workforce will help (CITY) companies remain competitive and can be a key factor in persuading new businesses to locate in this area.

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